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THE FIRST-CENTURY CONTROVERSY OVER JESUS AS A REVOLUTIONARY FIGURE

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

1939

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ELLIS E. JENSEN

FROM the time of Herod the Great's death to the great revolt against Rome in the years 66–70, Palestine was troubled by "men of violence" who repeatedly led revolts against Roman domination. Some of them posed as the Messiah in a period when, as Luke tells us, "the people were in expectation" of the coming of the Messiah to restore Israel.[1] Others assumed the title King of the Jews, or claimed to be both Messiah and King, terms which were synonymous in some circles.

Such revolutionists must have been numerous. Imperfect as our records of the time are, yet we have a long list. It includes Bagoas,[2] Judas the Galilean,[3] Simon,[4] Athrongeus,[5] the Perean insurgents,[6] all of the time of Archelaus; Barabbas[7] and possibly John the Baptist in the time of Pilate;[8] and after the death of Agrippa I, the Samaritan impostor,[9] Theudas,[10] Eleazar b. Dinai,[11] Amram,[12] Hanibas,[13] Jacob and Simon sons of Judas the Gali-

[1] Lk 3 15.
[2] Josephus, *Antt.*, XVII, ii, 4.
[3] Ibid., XVII, x, 5; Jos., *Wars*, II, iv, 1; Acts 5 37; Origen, *Celsus*, i, 57.
[4] Jos., *Antt.*, XVII, x, 6; *Wars*, II, iv, 2.
[5] Jos., *Antt.*, XVII, x, 7; *Wars*, II, iv, 3.
[6] Jos., *Wars*, II, iv, 2.
[7] Mk 15 7, 11, 15; Mt 27 16 f., 20–22, 26; Lk 23 18 f., 25; Jn 18 40.
[8] Mk 6; Mt 14; Lk 3 19 f., 9 7–9; Jos., *Antt.*, XVIII, v, 2.
[9] Jos., *Antt.*, XVIII, iv, 1.
[10] Jos., *Antt.*, XX, v, 1; Acts 5 36; Origen, *Cels.*, i, 57; vi, 11; Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.*, ii, 2.
[11] Jos., *Antt.*, XX, i, 1; viii, 5; *Wars*, II, xii, 4. Cf. Sotah ix, 9; Cant. Rabbah, iii, 5.
[12] Jos., *Antt.*, XX, i, 1.
[13] Ibid.

lean,[14] the Egyptian Jew,[15] the wilderness impostor,[16] Costobarus,[17] Saulus,[18] Menahem,[19] and John of Gishala.[20] Besides these revolutionists mentioned by name, Josephus several times calls attention to other unnamed men who carried on the same activities.[21]

Every study of the life of Jesus should give close attention to his activity in the midst of these revolutionary longings and outbreaks. Above every public question of the day was that of Israel's attitude to Roman rule. It filled the leadership of every Jewish group in the nation with concern. It profoundly affected the extension of messianic longings in certain circles. It drove some men, such as the Essenes, into the wilderness to escape the unclean foreigner. It caused the temple authorities and the Jerusalem Sanhedrin constant worry. And no rabbi could possibly function among the people without coming to grips with this condition of Israel's servitude. It was bound to figure in his outlook, message, and activity. Jesus, too, more than we have often supposed, found his message interpreted and evaluated by his hearers in its relation to the burning shame of Israel's control by foreign heathen.

How much Jesus was affected by the revolutionary currents of his time is clearly seen in the fact of his death as a revolutionary "robber"; as one who had plotted against the *pax romana*. He was brought before the procurator as a disturber of the political peace; he was accused of having led a rebellion; he was sentenced to death as a "king of the Jews." His execution was suffered not at the hands of his own people, but at the

[14] Jos., *Antt.*, XX, v, 2.

[15] Jos., *Antt.*, XX, viii, 6; *Wars*, II, xiii, 5; Acts 21 38. Cf. Origen, *Cels.*, v, 63.

[16] Jos., *Antt.*, XX, viii, 10.

[17] Ibid., XX, ix, 4.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Jos., *Wars*, II, xvii, 8 f.

[20] Jos., *Wars*, II, xxi; IV, iii, 13 f.; vii, 1; VII, viii, 1.

[21] Jos., *Antt.*, XVII, ix, 1–3; *Wars*, II, i, 2 f.; *Antt.*, XVII, x, 1–4, 8; *Wars*, II, iii f.; *Antt.*, XVIII, i, 1, 6; Gittin 56a; *Antt.*, XX, viii, 5; *Wars*, II, xii, 2–5; II, xiii, 4, 6; VI, v, 2. Cf. Mt 11 12; Lk 16 16; Lk 13 1; Acts 23 12–16; Gitt., v, 6; Jer. Gittin., V, 47b; Gitt., 55b.

hands of the authorities of Rome, and it took the form reserved for revolutionists.[22]

After Jesus' death, when his followers proclaimed him to be the Messiah, account had to be taken of the compromising manner of his death. Inasmuch as the first believers in him were messianists who repeatedly urged the people not to revolt, their message about Jesus urgently required an explanation of his execution as a revolutionist. It is reasonable to assume that those who resisted the church's claims for Jesus sought to discredit his manner of life, and an effective attack upon him was possible by pointing to his evil death as a convicted revolutionist.

The second and early third century apologists amply reveal that Christianity suffered not only political opposition but the displeasure of rival religions as well, and that attempts were made to discredit Jesus' life and activity in order to belittle the church's faith in him. If the historical Jesus could be discredited the church would suffer the most crushing blow imaginable.

We lack first century authors who mention open attacks on Jesus' manner of life as Justin, Origen, and Tertullian do.[23] But it is altogether probable that most of the criticisms of Jesus' life which circulated in the second century had already appeared in the late decades of the first century when the gospels were written.[24] If we view the gospels against such a background of opposition to Jesus, we uncover one of the important reasons why their writers successively produced hundreds of major and minor changes.

In presenting the Passion Story the evangelists faced a difficult task. Jesus had led some kind of violent act in the temple area during a festival. For long the temple area had been a focal point for those who plotted against Rome, and revolutionary disturbances there were frequent, necessitating a guard of soldiers on the walls.[25] Dagger-men often mingled with the crowd

[22] Assumption of Moses 6 9; Jos., *Antt.*, XVII, x, 10; XX, v, 2; *Wars*, II, v, 2; II, xii, 6; V, vi, 1.

[23] Mt 28 15 is a notable exception.

[24] Ernest Cadman Colwell holds this view in his suggestive book *John Defends the Gospel.*

[25] Jos. *Antt.*, XX, v, 3; *Wars*, II, xii, 1.

and did away with Jewish leaders opposed to revolutionary activities.[26]

Moreover, Jesus' arrest by troops armed for a fight, and the possession of swords by his followers offered difficulties for the early Christian propagandists. Admittedly Jesus had been arrested as a λῃστής, "robber," a word meaning a revolutionist rather than an ordinary thief.[27] What is more, there was no obscuring the fact that he had been condemned as a "king" of the revolutionary type, and that he had been crucified with two insurrectionaries called λῃσταί.[28] In mockery Jesus had been arrayed during his trial in regal robes; a crown, albeit of thorns, had been placed on his head; he had been mocked as a "king" both by the procurator's troops and by the crowd at the crucifixion.

Careful examination of the gospels reveals that the writers were anxious to exonerate Jesus of all legitimate accusation of having been a revolutionist. Mark's obvious concern with this matter engaged the attention of Matthew and Luke-Acts even more, and the Fourth Gospel improved even on the later synoptics in delineating Jesus as anything but a revolutionist.

The gospels present Jesus as a "king" not because their authors were unaware of the word's revolutionary connotation in the parlance of the day, but because the Messiah had been prophesied to be a king,[29] and Jesus' regal claims could be shown to be devoid of political meaning. By these means his death would stand out as a tragic miscarriage of justice.

Much more than Mark, the later synoptics show many evidences of the desire to erase from the record of Jesus' life any suspicion that he had been a pretender king of the revolutionary type common in his day. They stress Jesus' pacifistic program. Zacharias prophesied that this one who was to be born would "guide our feet into the way of peace."[30] The Sermon on the

[26] Gitt., V, 6; Jer. Gitt., V, 47b; Gitt., 55b. Cf. Acts 23 12–16.

[27] *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, ed. G. Kittel (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1933–) IV, 266.

[28] Mk 15 27; Mt 27 38. Note how Luke and John suppress the earlier tradition that Jesus was crucified with λῃσταί: Lk 23 32; Jn 19 18.

[29] Jer 23 5, 33 14–16, 19–22; Zech 3 8, 6 12; Hos 3 5, etc.

[30] Lk 1 79.

Mount shows clearly what Jesus conceived the Kingdom of God to be, and what kind of people he called into it: the poor in spirit, the meek, those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, those who are peacemakers.[31] Jesus teaches his followers to turn the other cheek to their enemies, and to meet their unjust demands with more than is asked.[32] They are to love their enemies, do good to them, and pray for those who persecute them.[33] Love of one's enemies is the mark of true righteousness,[34] for God does good both to the just and the unjust;[35] accordingly, Jesus' followers must emulate God in this.[36]

Throughout their gospels Matthew and Luke add to their Marcan source other items to show that Jesus preached a thorough-going quietistic ethic. In addition to Mark's "For what doth it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?"[37] they tell how Jesus deplored human attempts to establish the kingdom of God by violence.[38] Jesus' followers are to be wise as serpents but harmless as doves.[39] Though he could have done it, Jesus refused to call down fire and brimstone on the Samaritan village which refused to receive him.[40] He was deeply stirred by the violence which went on in Jerusalem against those who preached peace.[41] He wept over Jerusalem because it did not know "the things that belong unto peace," and was headed for destruction because of its mad revolutionary attitudes.[42] Unless the Jews repented, they all would die at the hands of Rome as those Galileans had died at the hands of Pilate during an up-

[31] Mt 5 3–9.
[32] Mt 5 39–41; Lk 6 27–30.
[33] Mt 5 44; Lk 6 35.
[34] Mt 5 46 f.; Lk 6 32–34.
[35] Mt 5 45.
[36] Mt 5 48.
[37] Mk 8 36; Mt 16 26; Lk 9 25.
[38] Mt 11 12; Lk 16 16. The "Jewish Gospel," undoubtedly the Gospel According to the Hebrews, reads, "the kingdom of heaven is ravished (or, plundered)"; James, *Apocr. N. T.*, 6 f.
[39] Mt 10 16.
[40] Lk 9 51–56.
[41] Mt 23 37–39; Lk 13 34 f.
[42] Lk 19 41–44.

rising at a festival.[43] Within the parable of the Minae, called forth because the disciples "supposed that the kingdom of God was immediately to appear" when Jesus entered Jerusalem, reference is made to what the end of those will be who oppose foreign rule.[44]

Mark's Passion Story has two items which are intended to show clearly that Jesus did not oppose Roman rule and had no revolutionary intentions, both of which the later synoptists adopt. The one is the saying, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's," indicating that Jesus did not oppose Jewish payment of taxes to the empire.[45] The other is Jesus' complaint that his arresters came out to seize him heavily armed as if he were a "robber," hiding in a lair. He was not this, but a teacher who taught openly in the Temple — conduct anything but that of a revolutionist.[46] To these Matthew and Luke add a number of others. While all three synoptists admit that there was some sword-play at the time of Jesus' arrest by an unidentified person,[47] Matthew records Jesus' displeasure by telling the wielder of the sword to put it up, for "they that take the sword shall perish with the sword."[48] Luke indicates that Jesus showed his displeasure with the use of weapons and his good will toward the wounded man by healing him.[49] Moreover, Luke offers an explanation of the presence of swords in Jesus' company.[50] It is difficult for us to decide precisely what Luke's meaning is, however. Either he ascribes the presence of swords to a misunderstanding of a symbolic saying of Jesus, or he means that Jesus asked that swords be brought in order to fulfill a saying of scripture: "And he was reckoned with the lawless (ἀνόμων)." The latter explanation appears to be the more likely. Matthew takes especial pains to

[43] Lk 13 1–3; cf. 13 4 f.

[44] Lk 19 11–28.

[45] Mk 12 17; Mt 22 21; Lk 20 25.

[46] Mk 14 48 f.; Mt 26 55; Lk 22 52 f.

[47] Mk 14 47; Lk 22 50. Only Matthew 26 51 says that he was one of Jesus' company.

[48] Mt 26 52.

[49] Lk 22 51.

[50] Lk 22 35–38.

point out that Jesus did not resist arrest in any way. He says that Jesus told Judas to proceed with that for which he had come.[51] He quotes Jesus' saying to the wielder of the sword that if he wished he could command twelve legions of angels from heaven to protect him from arrest, but this he would not do, for the scriptures had prophesied that thus it must be.[52]

It is apparent, therefore, that the gaps in Mark's armor are closed by the later synoptists, and conscious efforts are put forth to portray Jesus as a man of peace in even more convincing fashion than Mark had done. The later synoptists also take pains to improve on Mark's record of Jesus' concept of the kingdom. The statement of Paul, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God,[53] is consistently brought out by them. The kingdom is within one.[54] The Son of Man is king when he and the angels come in glory to judge the earth.[55] Jesus' kingdom is paradise.[56] Jesus and the church were not exercised about the political rule of Rome. The devil is the real ruler of this world, and Jesus refused to win earthly kingdoms, for to do so he would have to receive them from the devil's hands.[57] The kingdom of God is not a political creation, but a spiritual and moral one, founded by the Messiah at the behest of God, to terminate the devil's rule of the world and establish in its place the rule of God with his Messiah, as his vice-gerent, which rule will bring to an end all wickedness and injustice which so long had plagued the children of men because of the devil's sovereignty over the earth and the great nations. Jesus was not a political Messiah interested in the liberation of Israel from Roman rule and the re-establishment of the throne of David, as so many Jews had conceived the work of the Messiah to be. Rather, his was a spiritual undertaking for the purpose of wiping out the baneful effects of satanic dominion by driving

[51] Mt 26 50.
[52] Mt 26 52–54.
[53] I Cor 15 50.
[54] Lk 17 21.
[55] Mt 25 34, 40.
[56] Lk 23 42 f.
[57] Mt 4 8–10; Lk 4 5–8. Cf. Wilhelm Bousset, *Die Religion des Judentums im späthellenistischen Zeitalter*, 3d ed., 1926, 514 f.

out the devil's demons from people held in their grip, giving sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, healing to the lame, life to the dead, and good tidings to the poor and oppressed.[58] Again it is seen that these details of the Kingdom preaching are all non-Marcan materials.

But that Jesus none the less had died the death of a revolutionary pretender king by the order of the procurator, there was no denying. Stung by the repeated mention of this historical fact by the early church's opponents, the apologists more and more concentrated their defense on demonstrating that Pilate had really not held Jesus guilty of the political crime charged. Mark says that Pilate found no evil in Jesus' conduct, but "wishing to content the multitude," he did what they asked.[59] Matthew stresses this point by repeating Mark's single reference to Pilate's conviction that Jesus was innocent, but he adds two others: the item about Pilate's wife's belief in Jesus' innocence,[60] and how Pilate, for fear of a riot, in desperation washed his hands and said, "I am innocent of the blood of this upright man."[61] Matthew's three references are increased to six in Luke. Four separate times Pilate says that he can find no guilt or cause of death in Jesus.[62] In addition he is said to have pled with the Jews, "desiring to release Jesus."[63] Antipas, the man who once is said to have desired Jesus' death,[64] is also introduced to give his testimony that "nothing worthy of death had been done by him" in his, Antipas', dominions.[65] Pilate twice tries to escape his dilemma by offering to beat Jesus and let him go.[66] Only because the accusers' "voices prevailed,"[67] did he pronounce sentence and deliver Jesus up to their will.[68] In Acts Luke also

[58] Mt 11 5 f; Lk 7 22 f., 10 17 f.
[59] Mk 15 14 f.
[60] Mt 27 19, 23.
[61] Mt 27 24 f.
[62] Lk 23 4, 14, 22a, 22b.
[63] Lk 23 20.
[64] Lk 13 31–33.
[65] Lk 23 7–10, 15.
[66] Lk 23 16, 22.
[67] Lk 23 23.
[68] Lk 23 24 f.

mentions that Pilate "had determined to release him."[69] Luke also introduces the story of the penitent robber, or revolutionist, who testifies that Jesus had done nothing to merit a revolutionist's death.[70]

The author of the Fourth Gospel also felt compelled to meet the criticisms of Jesus as a condemned revolutionist which were plaguing the church at the time of the composition of the gospels. Therefore he introduces the item about how the Galilean crowd tried to seize him by force and make him a king, a role which he steadfastly refused to assume.[71] Jesus did not teach subversive doctrines in secret: "I have spoken openly to the world; I ever taught in synagogues, and in the temple, where all the Jews come together; and in secret spake I nothing."[72] John gets rid of the difficulty of explaining the temple cleansing, which to all appearances was the deed of a revolutionist, by making it an act purely religious and moral in character, motivated by the desire to bring to an end its state of being "a house of merchandise" to which it had sunk because of the traffic carried on there.[73] Moreover, the cleansing is put early in the career of Jesus, so that it was not for this deed that he was arrested, as the synoptics imply. The act of Jesus in this gospel was of such a nature that it could have no objectionable features before Pilate. It was directed toward the purification of Jewish religious life and practice, a purely Jewish concern. The final arrest of Jesus is brought about, therefore, not by this deed, but by the religious leaders' fears that the popularity of Jesus and his message of peace would bring about the loss of their position of privilege and wreck the national aspirations by submission to ever increasing Roman encroachments on Jewish life and institutions.[74]

John, like Matthew, makes it clear that Jesus did not resist arrest; he told Judas hours before: "What thou doest, do quickly."[75] He revealed his own identity, and so Judas did not

[69] Acts 3 13.
[70] Lk 23 40 f.
[71] Jn 6 14 f.
[72] Jn 18 19 f.
[73] Jn 2 13–17.
[74] Jn 11 47–50.
[75] Jn 13 27.

need to kiss him in order to show who he was, and no mention of a kiss is found.[76] Jesus disapproved of the use of the sword (Peter now is identified as the wielder), saying that this is the cup the Father willed him to drink.[77]

In John's account of the trial before Pilate, Jesus fully confesses that he is a king, but puts to rest all question of what kind of king he is: "My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence."[78]

Moreover, the tendency noted in the synoptics to multiply the number of times Pilate pronounced Jesus innocent is found in the Fourth Gospel as well. Three times he explicitly says, "I find no crime in him."[79] Once he allows them their point that he is guilty if they will have it so, but wants to release him in accordance with the custom of setting free a prisoner at the Passover.[80] Once more it is said that he sought to release Jesus.[81]

Precisely why Pilate finally pronounced sentence is not clearly stated. It appears that John has Pilate present Jesus to them as the king of the Jews in a spiritual sense, hoping they would accept him as such and drop their demands for his death. But the Jews protest that they will have none of it: there is but one king, and he is Caesar.[82] The preceding conversation between Pilate and Jesus took place after the Jews told Pilate that Jesus made himself out to be the Son of God. This filled Pilate with fear, and he questioned Jesus about it. This interview once more filled Pilate with the desire to release him. Thus it is implied that Pilate believed, or half-believed, that he was in the presence of a divine being.[83] If this is correct, then Pilate fully recognized the reasonableness of Jesus' claim to be a king in

[76] Jn 18 3–8.
[77] Jn 18 10 f.
[78] Jn 18 36 f.
[79] Jn 18 38, 19 4, 6.
[80] Jn 18 39.
[81] Jn 19 12.
[82] Jn 19 12–16.
[83] Jn 19 7–12.

the spiritual sense, and proceeded to present Jesus to the Jews for their approbation as such: "Behold your King!"[84] No other interpretation of these words of Pilate is adequate for explaining how he could have used them when he was trying to persuade the Jews to give up their insistent demand for Jesus' death, bound as these words were to antagonize them.

Thus John very delicately works into the story not only Pilate's conviction that Jesus was innocent of being an impostor revolutionary king, but also Pilate's belief in Jesus as a supernatural being qualified to be called King in a religious sense. Thus even Jesus' judge adds his witness to Jesus' divinity! This also gives point to Pilate's refusal to change the placard on the cross to "He said, I am the King of the Jews."[85] To Pilate Jesus truly was the King of the Jews in the religious sense, and so he refuses to make the change. Thus even Pilate is aware that the people have committed the dastardly deed of rejecting their heavenly King, and adds his support to the main contention of the early Christian preachers to the Jews. He makes the same confession in his own way that Nathanael had made much earlier: "Thou art the Son of God; thou art King of Israel."[86]

Modern gospel study has been fascinated by the problem of the numerous minor changes in parallel pericopes, the omission of certain earlier pericopes, and the addition of others in the later synoptics. One of the keys to an understanding of these changes is to be found in the fact that the church needed not only to proclaim Jesus but to defend him. The glorious characteristics which were his required publication; but the difficult facts of his lowly background, his apparent lack of messianic proportions, and the compromising manner of his death also required the attention of the evangelists. We should view them not simply as evangelists but also as apologists. They published their works about Jesus not only to an indifferent world: it was also hostile to some degree. Accordingly they were constrained to delineate Jesus in such a way that the church's opponents

[84] Jn 19 14.
[85] Jn 19 19–22.
[86] Jn 1 49.

could fasten on little or nothing that might be turned against Jesus. This need caused Matthew and Luke to revise their Marcan and probably their other sources in favor of a Jesus less liable to criticism. John completed the process not by further revisions but by almost entirely rewriting the story of Jesus as it had developed up to his day. In a word, he elevated Jesus above attack by obscuring almost completely the man of Galilee and setting forth instead the "Word become flesh."